

The Primal Man as Grant Watson Saw Him

MR. ALFRED KNOFF, the publisher, tells this story:

"At lunch last summer the representative of one of the largest American publishers told me that his house was about to reject, against his judgment, two unusual novels by a new writer, Grant Watson. He urged me to get hold of them, and succeeding in this, I sent one to H. L. Mencken and the other to Joseph Hergesheimer, author of *The Three Black Pennys*. Both reports were highly favorable. I read the novels with the greatest interest and enjoyment, and accepted them immediately."

Those who have had the privilege of reading the first to be published, *When Bonds Are Loosed*, are prepared to agree with the decision of the critics in question, for the book has a strength and a beauty that set it far above the average fiction of to-day. The writer is a young man, and one feels the rush and impetuous enthusiasm of youth in this swift story of adventure in wild places of the earth.

An Unusual Setting.

The setting for the action is near Australia, chiefly on two islands off the west coast, the main action taking place on Kanna Island. Mr. Watson writes, not from cloistered imagination of primitive places, but from actual first hand information and experience.

Having been trained as a zoologist at Trinity College, Cambridge, and having obtained a Class I. honors in a natural science tripos, he went on an ethnological expedition to northwest Australia. In his profession as zoologist he spent fifteen months in that wild region, eight months of the time alone with two other white men, natives of the section. We see the impress of this experience in his characterization of the young scientist, Hicksey, in this first novel.

But the human interest of the region took a stronger hold on Mr. Watson's imagination than did the merely scientific. He was more gripped by the psychological than by the zoological aspects of the life there. From an ethnological study of humanity in the mass he turned to an analysis of the white man in isolation among the aborigines.

Smashing Adventure.

Purely as a story of adventure this novel should find many appreciative readers. The action goes with a sweep and a swing that carry one irresistibly along.

Men will particularly like the book. It gives descriptions of vivid and stirring action, of romantic adventure, of deeds that make the pulses thrill. Events move forward with a rush, from the first chapter to the last, from the drunken fight in the restaurant with which the action opens to the tremendous struggle described in the final chapters.

The dreadful drama of the scene where Sherwin, with hands and clothing bloody from the murder of his rival, fronts the woman who has been the cause, thinking to slay her as well, and the desperate expedients by which she deflects him from his purpose, are powerfully told.

Not only those who like romantic adventure, but those who care for stark realism as well, will like this book. You feel in every page and line of it that it is from life. Even the most thrilling incidents seem actual events in which the reader shares.

Unrelenting Realism.

The realism is stark and brutal. The material is at times hideous and revolting, but it is truthful. The men and women are prisoners of their environment, out-



E. L. GRANT WATSON.
Author of "Where Bonds are Loosed."

casts in a sense from the civilized world, and their play of wild and lawless passions is repulsive but convincing.

Some of the accounts of cruelty practised on the natives, of neglect of the sick till their wounds are in unspeakable condition, of the tyranny that exists merely for the exercise of power over the helpless, of purposeless cruelty on body and soul, make the book unpleasant reading for sensitive natures; but the picture would be incomplete if they were left out.

Scenes You Can't Forget.

The book is a triumph in description of setting, in atmospheric impressiveness. You see this country with its beauty and its awfulness, where the heat of the sun and the fire of primal passions are in accord. Nature and humanity are here blended and harmonized with the effect of inevitability shown in Thomas Hardy's studies. The influence of nature upon man is in fact one of the great things of the book.

Every description seems etched in with skilful hands, and some of the pictures are unforgettable. Such are the initial description of a dining room, with the thermometer registering 110 in the shade, with the knives and forks hot to the touch, with the bottle flies buzzing over the food; the picture of the boatload of negroes chained together, with the horrible smell of decay from the cargo of the Sithi; portrayal of the doomed sheep waiting on the cliff for its inevitable moment of weakness, watching the eagle circling above it to peck out

its eyes and devour its brain; the description of bright yellow and black water snakes that remind one of the unreal reptiles in *The Ancient Mariner*; the reflection of the enigmatic, sad faces of the negroes.

There are beautiful passages, too, descriptions of the cloudless, star strewn sky; of the white sand hills, the long line of breakers that surge against the beach, the brilliant expanse of lagoon glittering and shimmering like a peacock's wing, with violets and greens and blues; the pepper trees, the acacias, the myrtles and the sandalwoods, all of which lend a glamour to the story. The account of the hurricane at night with its accompanying storm of human passions is as well done as anything of the kind in late literature, a fit companion passage to the wild scene given in Gertrude Atherton's *The Conqueror*.

The Mind of a Man Alone.

But it is not in romantic adventure, not in brutal realism, not in beauty of description, that the chief power of the book lies. All these are there in good measure, but more besides for the thinking reader.

The work is most valuable as a social study, as an analysis of the influence of environment upon human nature, of the effect upon character of isolation from one's kind.

There are various struggles in the book, dramatic and tense, it is true; but the biggest struggle of all is the conflict of man with the deteriorating influences of

tropic nature, of the slow attrition of moral character deprived of social support. Isolation is the great protagonist here, against which man struggles hopelessly.

By dramatic action, by character individualization and by philosophic exposition, this theme is set forth in compelling style. We see the aspects of it illustrated in each character described, in the slow moral decay or the swift surrender to the evil lurking under the surface of life. We see how each soul is dependent on his fellows for moral support, for a standard of values without which he can live but an animal existence. The life of the natives serves as an excellent foil for that of the supposedly civilized men and women, for, having no social standards to begin with, they remain unchanged by events that wreck the whites.

This new book by an unknown writer will claim its place among the novels that have something to say and that say it with power and with charm.

WHERE BONDS ARE LOOSED. By E. L. GRANT WATSON. Alfred A. Knopf. \$1.50.

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